

THE FRIENDS OF CROOME



NEWSLETTER

Spring 2022 Issue 37



Croome Court, with the church on the hill in the background © National Trust

A CROOME WITH A VIEW

a house with definite Capabilities *by Mike Rendell, September 2016*

When I was considering which talks to select for the nine presentations I needed for the cruise on board the “Boudicca” to the Cape Verde Islands, in November 2016, I was fairly sure that I would include one on gardens and garden designs in the eighteenth century. I then started to have second thoughts – after all, it was the 300th anniversary of the birth of Lancelot “Capability” Brown, and every man and his dog seemed to be bringing out books on him and his gardens. Rather than jump on the band-wagon I decided to be my usual contrarian self, and do the talk as a hatchet-job on Brown – he was a vandal who destroyed stunning Elizabethan gardens, he was a copyist who merely followed where Bridgman and Kent had gone before, he was not as good a salesman as Humphry Repton with his marvellous little red books...

And then I went to Croome... situated just off the M5, south of Worcester, it really is a fascinating place to visit. Some 670 acres were acquired by the National Trust in 1996. More recently, the Trust was granted a lease of Croome Court after a period of half a century when it was used as a Roman Catholic School and then as a Hare Krishna centre. Neither set of users would appear to have done much to preserve or enhance Brown’s handiwork, and clearly the land surrounding the fine Palladian mansion had suffered from years of intensive agriculture, deep ploughing, timber extraction and so on. So what we see now, before all the tree planting works being implemented by the National Trust come to fruition, is something similar to what Brown would have seen after he had completed his early rounds of landscaping, drainage and so on, but before his tree-planting scheme had been completed.

friendsofcroome.org.uk



Dunstall Castle

What I had not appreciated was that Brown was not just the parkland designer – he was the architect for the main house, designed for the 28 year old 6th Earl of Coventry when he inherited the title and the estate with its Jacobean mansion house, in 1751. Apart from re-modelling the house, Brown the architect also called for the entire village of Croome to be razed to the ground, and all the inhabitants moved out of view “round the corner” behind some trees. He didn’t think that the medieval church looked in place – so he pulled it down, and in its place left us a gothic church which to my mind looks slightly odd, divorced as it is from any obvious congregation and some distance from the big house. Clearly it was seen by Brown as “just another eye-catcher” – almost a folly-on-the-hill. Not content with designing the main house, Brown was responsible for many of the interiors before handing over to Robert Adam in 1760. Perhaps slightly surprisingly, Brown left intact the seven-acre walled garden (one of the largest enclosed gardens in Europe at the time, and now privately owned).

Brown’s Grotto © Gardening Ways Blog



Croome Church, standing atop the hill in splendid isolation

Several of the eye-catchers you can see around the horizon are not actually Brown’s – the Park Seat, the London Gate and the Temple Greenhouse were all designed by Robert Adam, while James Wyatt was responsible for the Panorama Tower and the Worcester Lodge. Between the two of them they also designed the ‘ruins’ comprising Pirton Castle and Dunstall Castle. Brown, however, was responsible for the lake and its bridges and the Island Pavilion, the Rotunda and the grotto.



Fake, it’s all fake! But boy oh boy, who’s to know?

But I think what impressed me most was the realisation of the extent of Brown’s powers as a water engineer. I believe he acquired these skills while working in the Fens before accepting the Croome commission. When the young Earl asked Brown to come up with suggestions for the site, it consisted of a boggy morass quite unsuited to farming or gardening. Brown had the skills to know how to drain the site, alter the water tables, construct stone-lined culverts and drains, and to draw the water off into a new pond. He quickly perfected the means to line his ponds with a twelve-inch layer of puddled clay (to stop water leakage).



Stone drainage culvert by the Evergreen Shrubbery
© National Trust

He then installed what was to become his signature feature – a sinuous serpentine pond resembling a river, which wound its way under Japanese-style bridges before disappearing out of view. In fact of course it isn't a river – the artificial pond simply ends in a spot hidden from the house by a clump of trees. The problem with this type of arrangement is that ponds tend to fill up with silt – soil carried down off the land in the rains. I see that when Brown arrived at Burghley he installed special silt ponds – holding-pools where the silt was allowed to settle rather than being washed down into the main pond. That way, each year the labourers could dig out the year's silt and put it back on the land. But at Croome the silt was able to build up, and by the time that the National Trust came along, they had to shift 50,000 cubic metres of mud and sludge which was silting up the pond. The improvement to the site has settled in immediately and the lake area looks remarkably settled and 'natural'.



All around the park Brown constructed ha-has (to control sheep and cattle without the need for visually intrusive walls and hedges). He also introduced carriageways which wend their way circuitously around the park, so that you get "now-you-see-it, now-you-don't" glimpses of the main house before, at last, your coach and four pulls up in front of the imposing entrance to Croome Court. It really is well worth a visit, and it has given me food for thought as to whether to include Brown in my next-book-but-one. First comes 'Petticoat Pioneers' – about women in the eighteenth century who shifted paradigms and made breakthroughs in what was a predominately male world, but after that I am going to do one on Georgian greats. On reflection I think Brown deserves the accolade of 'great'. After all, any man who persuaded the landed gentry to pay him fees of many thousands of pounds was doing his bit to even up the inexcusable gap between the rich and the poor. In doing so he helped elevate the garden to a really significant and important feature of everyday life.



Funny, ha-ha?

Brown may have designed "only" a couple of hundred gardens but many, many, more times that number were based upon copies of his ideas and designs. His work made him a wealthy man. The customer account ledgers of Drummonds Bank of Charing Cross, London, which are held in RBS's archives, show that in 1768 alone he had receipts totalling £32,279 and that over the period of his working life he was paid more than half a million pounds. In modern money that makes Brown a multi-millionaire – a tribute to his abilities as a businessman as well as a garden designer. He also deserves credit as a water engineer – his ability to control water, put in dams and drains and to disguise such works so that they are almost totally hidden from view.

The fact that he was also a first rate architect surprised me – but I am reminded that Humphry Repton had this to say about him: "Mr Brown's fame as an architect seems to have been eclipsed by his celebrity as a landscape gardener, he being the only professor of the one art, while he had many jealous competitors in the other. But when I consider the number of excellent works in architecture designed and executed by him, it becomes an act of justice to his memory to record that, if he was superior to all in what related to his particular profession, he was inferior to none in what related to the comfort, convenience, taste, and propriety of design in the several mansions and other buildings he planned."



Dessert Service

made by Barr Flight & Barr to Peggy Pitches' requirements by Anne Matthews

In 1812, Peggy Pitches, the wife of the 7th Earl of Coventry, commissioned a dessert service from Barr Flight and Barr designed and produced to her bespoke requirements. The manufacturer had a showroom in Coventry Street in London as well as one in Worcester: Peggy might have gone to either. She would have been shown a range of plates and bowls from which she was able to choose, and to order as many of each item as she wanted.

Dessert services usually had ice pails and sauce tureens as well. The ice pails had a plain inner basin. You can just see the rim if you look carefully at the pails in the golden box display at Croome Court. Ice was placed in the base of the container, then whatever was to be kept cold went into the basin and the lid placed on top. Often lids also had a concave 'bowl' for more ice if necessary. Peggy would have been able to choose from a selection of handles and finials for these.

There was a range of colours for the ground to choose from. Peggy wanted azure blue and asked for the panels to depict

flowers and for each panel to be different. Gilding was an extra. It put 50% on top of the final cost. Royal Worcester still has a box full of copper etching strips of various designs used for the gilding strips, for customers to make their choice. Royal Worcester also still has a box of family crest etching plates which would have been used to add this to each item. Flight Barr and Barr then worked out the cost of making each piece from the raw clay to the finished article and totalled it up. It came to £182 11s., a considerable sum in those days (a comparison website tells me this is £15,088.48 in today's values!)

The round plates and bowls were made on a lathe, the pails, their lids and the square bowls were made in moulds, or on the wheel. When it came to adding the colour, the ground was painted first and the object fired. Barr Flight and Barr had long prided themselves on the accuracy of their pictures. But it was impossible to get flowers out of season. In the Royal Worcester archive is a book dated 1780 of botanical studies painted in water colour. If you look in this book and then at the dessert service you can spot the flowers used in Peggy's design.



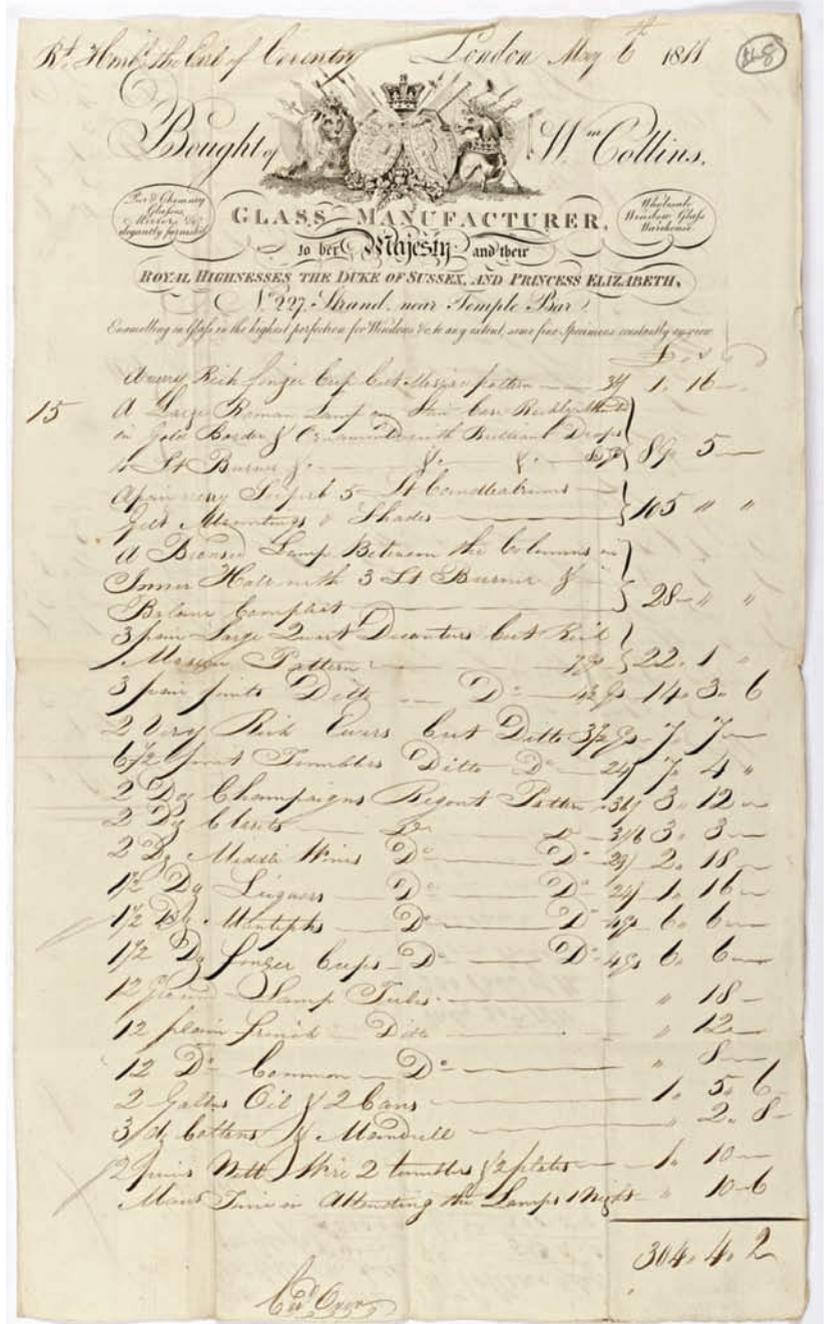
Items from the dessert service designed for Peggy Pitches, Countess of Coventry (photographs by Lionel Matthews for the National Trust)



The artist had to paint the pictures on blank panels in a special order as the colours needed different temperatures to fire. A further complication is that the colours in their raw state bore no relation to the finished one when the object has been fired. Royal Worcester has a very old chart which would have been used to help the artist.

After, in this case, seven firings for colours and then the glaze, the gilded edges were added. The strips were used as a stencil, painted with gold then pressed onto tissue paper. This was stuck to the edges and fired. The paper was then burnt off, leaving the gold. Finally the gold had to be buffed up, 'burnished' and the pieces were finished.

Thomas Flight, the London agent for the original Worcester Porcelain Company bought the company in 1783. As soon as two of his sons were old enough to run the business he handed it over to them. One of the sons, John died in 1791. His brother Joseph took Martin Barr as a partner in 1792. Later, Barr brought in his son; hence the name, Barr Flight and Barr.



Invoice from Barr Flight and Barr to the 7th Earl of Coventry, including the Countess' purchases

ACTOR IN COLLISION

Mr. Charles Coventry fined £20

(The Evening News, Friday August 20th 1926)

Charles William Coventry, of Upper Brook Street, W., and of Earls Croome Court, Worcester, pleaded guilty at Marlborough Street yesterday to driving a motor-car at a dangerous speed in Grosvenor Square, on June 16.

Mr. Herbert Muskett, for the Commissioner of Police, stated that Mr. Fred Astaire, the dancer, was driving a car when, according to the statement before him, he saw Mr. Coventry coming straight at him at a speed which Mr. Astaire estimated at about 35 to 40 miles an hour. (The speed limit at the time was 20 miles an hour).



Mr. Astaire pulled sharply to his off side to avoid a head-on collision, but there was a side collision, and both cars were damaged. There was a young woman in the car driven by Mr. Coventry, and she was slightly injured.

Mr. Coventry, who has a clean licence, was fined £20, with £3 costs, and his licence was ordered to be endorsed with a year's disqualification from driving. It was intimated there would be an appeal.

Charles William Gerald Coventry (1900-1941) is the grandson of the 9th Earl of Coventry and the older brother of Francis Henry Coventry (1912-2004) the 12th Earl. They are the sons of Charles John Coventry (1867-1929) and his wife Lily.

A Lieutenant-Commander in the Royal Navy during World War II, Charles William died of natural causes on 10 October 1941 and is buried in Forest Lawn cemetery, Norfolk, Virginia, USA.

Fred Astaire was appearing at the Empire Leicester Square in 'Lady Be Good' with his sister Adele.



View of the machine in motion, and of a tree during transportation

The Eminently Capable Mr. Brown

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and his magnificent tree moving machine

based on a study by the University of Melbourne (2016)

Born on the estate of Kirkhale Hall, Northumberland to a yeoman father and house maid, Brown is of course better known by his nickname of 'Capability', for assuring his aristocratic clients of the great potential, or 'capability', for realising improvements to their landed estates. Brown remodelled the spaces surrounding English stately homes into verdant sweeping landscapes, of a kind that could be appreciated from the ease of one's carriage, or from vantage points picturesquely positioned in one's grounds.

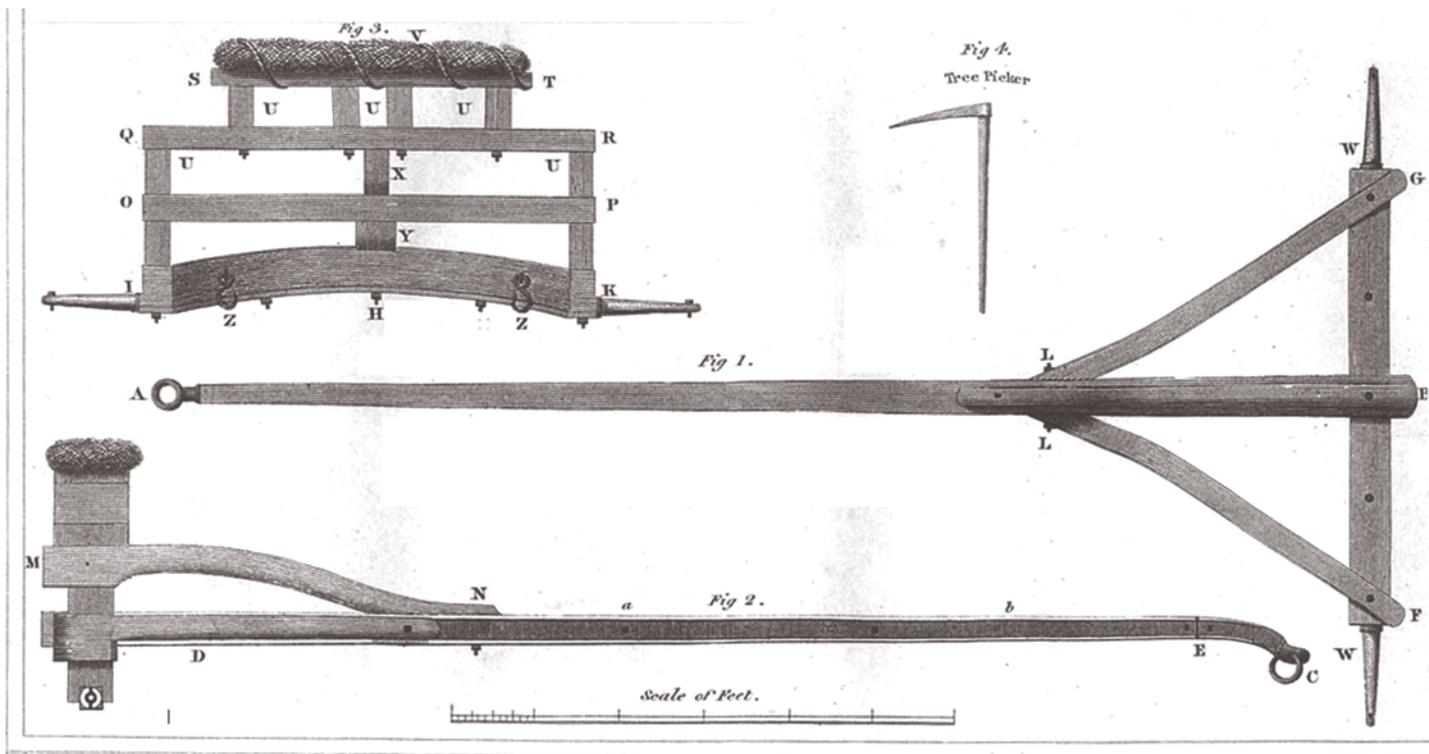
By account Brown was a swift worker and could assess and produce a plan within an hour of riding about an estate and soon found his services sought by the most fashionable and wealthy gentry of the day. This success was in part due to his ability to envision and design expansive gardens, but was underpinned by a particular capacity to translate theory into practice.

One of Brown's signature devices was the deft positioning of trees and copses and other arboreal plants to create 'naturalistic' effects in the landscape. Trees, however, take years to grow and planting is rarely the interest of younger generations. If Brown's gardens were to mature in their owners' lifetimes, then mature plantings were needed – his wealthy clientele simply couldn't, or wouldn't, wait the 30 or more years needed for an oak tree to attain a lofty height, or for a picturesque woodland feature to mature. One shortcut to achieving this instantaneous sylvan idyll was the technique of repositioning semi-mature and advanced trees in a new setting, as if they had grown there from seed. Methods for transplanting large trees had been devised before but it was an expensive and labour intensive activity, based on

a tradition of moving the plants in an upright aspect, using a cumbersome combination of chains and pulleys. Brown was the first to understand the practical advantage of moving trees in a horizontal position and designed a simple but effective machine for this purpose. The machine, which served him well for the length of his career, was not only faster but enabled transplanting of advanced trees of between 15-36 feet relatively easily.

Writing 40 years after Brown's death, Sir Henry Steuart, the author of *The Planter's guide...* (1828) describes Brown's 'Transplanting Machine' as it was used at Allanton House, Lanarkshire, Scotland: 'It consists of a strong Pole and two Wheels, with a smaller wheel occasionally used, which is fixed at the extremity of the pole, and turns on a pivot. The pole operates both as a powerful lever, to bring down the Trees to the horizontal position, and in conjunction with the wheels, as a still more powerful conveyance, to remove them to their new situation'.

The roles of the various labourers involved in the transplanting operation were critical: the Machiner (who positioned the apparatus to receive the tree), the Steersman (who walked at the rear of the machine and managed the top of the tree), the Balancemen (two or more workers who scrambled on top of the horizontal tree and acted as movable counterweights), and the whole party supported by assistants who held ropes and walked at the side of the transplanting apparatus to help steady the moving specimen.



TRANSPLANTING MACHINE.

Occasionally things did not go to plan, such as when a tree unexpectedly took on the properties of a giant catapult: 'In proceeding with the Machine down a gentle slope of some length, at an accelerated pace, on which occasion both the Balancemen had gained the top with their usual agility, it so fell out, that the cords, which secured the rack-pins of the root, unfortunately gave way. This happened so suddenly, that the root at once struck the ground, with a force equal to the united weight of the mass, and the momentum of the movement, and pitched the Balancemen (now suddenly lifted to an elevation of nearly thirty feet), like two shuttle-cocks, to many yards'

distance, over the heads of the horses and the driver, who stood in amazement at their sudden and aerial flight! Luckily for the men, there was no frost upon the ground, so that, instead of breaking their bones, they fell only on the soft turf of the park; from which soon getting up and shaking themselves, they heartily joined in the laughter of their companions, at the extraordinary length of the leap which they had taken'.

Apparently, despite the collective mirth, it 'proved impossible' to coerce the Balancemen 'to resume their elevated functions, for many months after'...

View in the park at Allanton House, as wooded by the transplanting machine



MEMORIES OF HUNT MEETINGS AT CROOME

by John Chugg

From 1874 to 1947 (when Croome Court was sold), the opening meets of the Earl of Coventry's hounds were always held at the north front of Croome Court. These were very grand affairs: two liveried footmen with white gloves and six silver Coventry buttons down the tails of their coats would dispense drinks from large silver salvers, while maids in black dresses edged in white lace would bring food to the mounted followers. The Field Master was the 9th Earl of Coventry's son-in-law Mr. Gerald Dudley-Smith from Strensham Court.



The Hunt at Croome. From the Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News, December 1901. Joint Masters of the Foxhounds, the Hon H. Coventry & Mr. G.D. Smith. (Clive O'Donnell)

Notable families would transport their mounts by horse vans on trains to Defford station or Wadborough siding, then hack to Croome Court. The three Lygon daughters, Lady Sybil, Lady Mary and Lady Dorothy from Madresfield Court would arrive with their grooms in cockaded top hats, silver buttons and hunting canteens strapped to their backs for the ladies' refreshment. Colonel Jack Lance, the King's Riding Master, attended with his daughter Jaqueline who always hunted side-saddle. Michael Beary, who rode a Derby winner, joined the party. What a superb sight it must all have been.

When Croome Court was sold in 1947, the opening meet moved to the RAF Defford Officers' Mess superbly situated near to Croome church. They were smart occasions. Airmen in full dress uniform would dispense drink and food. On one memorable occasion, however, my pony put his nose under the drinks tray causing whisky and port to fly everywhere, especially over the officer holding the tray!



John Chugg on Royal Athlete, winner of the 1995 Grand National, seen here hunting at Croome

The 'Hunt Cap' cost me, a humble farmer's son, half-a-crown (12.5 pence). Major Ted Rayer would collect the Hunt Cap in a satchel from his cob. Major Rayer was also the auctioneer who disposed of the contents of Croome Court in 1947. The sale was held in the large stable yard, with the very finest furniture being sold at Sotheby's and Christie's, the remainder being retained by the Croome Estate Trustees.

The hounds usually moved off from the Officers' Mess to draw Boat House Cover, The Belt, The Menagerie, Pheasant Wood, Lickmoor, Mount Pleasant and around Pirton Pool. Fred Rimell and his wife Mercy riding side-saddle, and Barry Hills the famous flat race trainer on a good 14.2 hands high (57 inches) pony, were among the mounted field.

Lieutenant-Colonel Osbert Dudley-Smith, grandson of the 9th Earl, was Field Master and woe betide any rider whose pony got ahead of him – they would be sent home immediately!

In 1960, the opening meet moved for a few years to Croome Home Farm whose tenant was Jerry Wiggin. The farm was originally where the 9th Earl bred his pedigree herd of Hereford cattle: a large weather vane of a Hereford Bull is still in place above the oast house on the farm.



Croome Hunt c.1926 (Beryl Claytor)

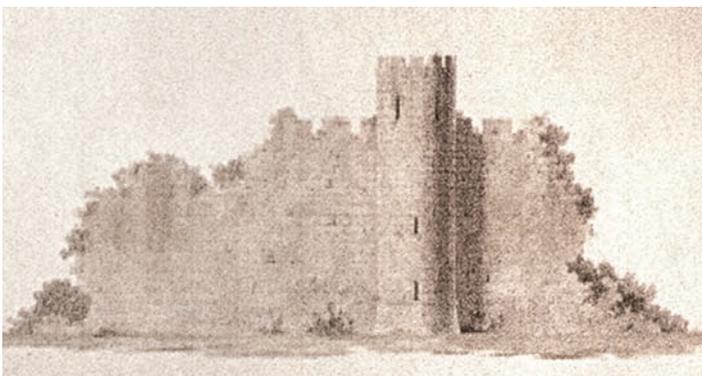


Pirton Castle

from an article by Midland Conservation Ltd

Pirton Castle prior to restoration (Philip Halling, 2006)

Pirton Castle was designed as both an eyecatcher and belvedere (an architectural structure sited to take advantage of a fine or scenic view) by the architect James Wyatt in 1797. A watercolour signed by James Wyatt dated 1801 is said to be probably painted from life as it very closely matches today's remains.



A watercolour of Pirton Castle by James Wyatt, 1801



Pirton Castle following restoration in 2009

Constructed as a ruin, the Grade II listed Pirton Castle is one of three outer eyecatchers at Croome, the others being Dunstall Castle to the south and the Panorama Tower to the west. Pirton Castle has been managed by the National Trust since 1996. Midland Conservation Ltd was engaged to stabilise and repair the existing masonry and carefully remove extensive destructive vegetation. Rebuilding upper levels of the stonework along with re-pointing of the masonry was carried out under the direction of architect John C Goom. The principal aim of the project was to 'conserve as found' and the works were successfully completed in August 2009.



The Cricketing Coventrys

Part Two: The Hon. Charles Coventry by Clive O'Donnell

Charles John Coventry, second son of the 9th Earl, is one of England's more unlikely test cricketers, not least because his two appearances against South Africa in 1889 were the only two first-class matches of his career!

Born in London in February 1867, Coventry was educated at Eton College before joining the Worcestershire Regiment. A lover of the countryside and a fearless rider, he followed the hounds from an early age. He enjoyed ball games too and aged 18, during the 1885 cricket week at Boughton Park in Worcester, he played for both I Zingari and MCC against Worcestershire, contributing a modest total of 3 runs across both matches. Over the next three seasons he played for and against Worcestershire during the week, including for the Regiment, always a keenly contested fixture.



Charles Coventry during the 1887 Cricket Week at Boughton Park, Worcester

In December 1888, Coventry was selected as a member of Major Robert Warton's party of English cricketers that toured South Africa, playing twenty matches in total, two of which were retrospectively given test match status. The standard of cricket in South Africa wasn't particularly strong at that time, so the tour party was a mixture of seasoned

professionals such as Johnny Briggs and Bobby Abel, and amateurs of modest ability such as Coventry. The strength of the side was likened to a 'weak county team'.

It was an arduous tour with thousands of miles journeyed over often difficult terrain by rail and by coach and horses. In the two first class 'test' matches, which the tourists won by 8 wickets and an innings and 202 runs, Coventry, made scores of 12 and 1 not out. Described as 'a fair bat with a free style who can hit hard', he played in 18 out of the 20 games scoring a total of 164 runs at an average of 10.40. He also took 3 wickets at 22 runs apiece. By contrast, the Lancashire bowler, Johnny Briggs took a remarkable 275 wickets on the tour with his left arm spin, at a cost of only 5.39. He was virtually unplayable on the matting wickets.

When Lord Hawke next took a team to South Africa six years later, Coventry was also in the country, but in a military rather than a cricketing capacity, having been seconded to the Bechuanaland Mounted Police Force. He was captured and briefly imprisoned after the botched Jameson Raid over the New Year weekend, 29 December 1895 - 2 January 1896. Reports reached Croome that he was dead, having been seen under a blanket 'kicking like a shot hare'. A memorial service was arranged at Croome, but shortly before it began, with the mourners arriving, a telegram came through with news that he was alive. The planned wake became a party of a more joyous kind!

"The Hon. Charles Coventry is not dead, as reported in my telegram of January 5th. The doctor at Krugersdorp telegraphs this morning as follows:—'Captain Coventry is alive and out of danger. Is very comfortable. Flesh wounds through back. Spine not injured. Please inform his relatives.' Till this morning wire to Krugersdorp was not open."

He played little cricket on his return from South Africa although he did turn out in the summer of 1900 for Worcestershire Club & Ground against the King's School and for his father's team, Lord Coventry's XI, against East Gloucestershire at Cheltenham. Also in that year, he married an American, Lily Whitehouse, from Newport, Rhode Island, with whom he had two sons and two daughters.

Coventry's military career saw him serve with the West African Frontier Force and during WWI he commanded the Worcestershire Yeomanry during the Gallipoli Campaign of 1915. A year later, approaching fifty years of age, he was captured along with many other members of his regiment



Major Warton's touring party to South Africa in 1888/89. Coventry is seated next to the Major, second from the left.

near Katia in Egypt and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of the Turks in Jerusalem. In 1922 he took command of the re-formed Worcestershire and Oxfordshire Yeomanry Brigade, now serving as 100 Field Brigade, (Royal Artillery). He retired from the Yeomanry in 1925 with the rank of Colonel.

After the war he became one of the Jockey Club's official starters and 'Charlie Coventry' as he was universally known, became a popular figure at race tracks the length and breadth of the country, often accompanied by his wife and daughter. He was renowned for his wonderfully quick eye and an abundance of patience with even the most restless of horses. In April 1928, returning from a race meeting at Manchester, he was caught up in a melee of football supporters at New Street Station in Birmingham and was knocked to the ground, unconscious. He suffered concussion and required stitches to a head wound and was confined to bed for several days.

Coventry died the following year, aged 62, at home at Earls Croome after months of ill health. The funeral took place at Croome with a simultaneous memorial service at Worcester Cathedral. At the churchyard gates, stood two of the Croome Huntsmen in hunting 'pink' and officers and men of the Worcestershire Yeomanry lined the drive, afterwards encircling the mourners at the graveside. As a horseman and a proud military man, Charles Coventry would have appreciated the tribute.

